

PERSONAL LANDSCAPE

Edited by LAWRENCE DURRELL, ROBIN FEDDEN, BERNARD SPENCER

NUMBER 3 JUNE 1942

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LANDSCAPE

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LAWRENCE DURRELL

ROBIN FEDDEN

G. S. FRASER

ROBERT LIDDELL

BERNARD SPENCER

RUTH SPEIRS

TERENCE TILLER

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THE BIRTH OF VENUS.

That morning following the night which, full of fear,
had passed with cries, disquiet, tumult —
the seas once more burst open, screamed.
And when the scream had slowly closed again
and fell into the abyss of dumb fishes
down from the pale day and beginning of the skies — :
the sea gave birth.

With the first sun there gleamed the hair-foam
of the wide groin of billows at whose brim
the maiden, white, embarrassed, wet, arose.
And as a young green leaf stirs, stretches
and gradually unfolds its rolled-up borders,
her body slowly opened to the coolness
and to the untouched early wind.

The knees rose clear like moons
and dived into the cloudy borders of the thighs ;
the slender shadow of the calves retreated,
the feet became elastic and grew bright ;
alive like throats of people drinking
were the joints.

In the cup of the pelvis lay the body
like a young fruit in a child's hand.
Within its navel's narrow goblet
was the whole darkness of this luminous life.
Below it, lightly, rose the little wave
constantly overflowing towards the loins
where now and then there was a quiet purling.
But full of light and without shadows—
like a birch-tree grove in April—
warm, empty and unhidden lay the womb.

And now the brisk scales of the shoulders stood
in equipoise already on the upright body
that rose out of the pelvis like a fountain
and, hesitating, fell in the long arms
and, swifter, in the full fall of the hair.

And then the face passed very slowly by :
from the foreshortened darkness of its bending
to clear horizontal rise.
Behind it, steep, the chin closed in.

Now that the neck was straightened like a beam
and like a flower-stem in which sap rises,
the arms stretched forward too, like necks
of swans when searching for the shore.

And the first draw of breath then came
like morning wind into this body's early dawn.
In the most tender branches of the vein-trees
rose a whisper, and the blood began
to rush above its depths.

This wind increased : and now it flung itself
with all its breath in the new breasts
and filled them and pressed into them,
so that they — sails full of distance —
drove the light maiden towards the shore.

Behind her,
who strode hurriedly along young shores,
the whole forenoon
flowers and blades of grass rose, warm, embarrassed,
as if out of embrace. She went, she ran.

But in the hardest hour, at noon,
the sea rose once again and flung
a dolphin into the same spot.
Dead, red, and open.

THE PANTHER.

In the *Jardin des Plantes*, Paris.

His gaze has grown so weary of the passing
of bars that it no longer anything retains.
It seems to him there are a thousand bars,
behind a thousand bars no world.

The soft gait of his supple powerful steps
revolving in the smallest of all circles
is like a dance of strength around a centre
in which there stands, stunned, a great will.

Only at times the curtain of his pupil
noiselessly rises—. Then an image enters,
moves through the concentrated stillness of his limbs —
and in his heart it ceases to exist.

THE BLIND MAN.

(Paris.)

See, there he goes and interrupts the town —
that is not there on his dark spot —
as a dark crack goes through a brightly
coloured cup. And the reflection

of things is painted on him as on paper;
he does not take it in.
Only his feeling moves as if it caught
the world in little waves :

a silence, a resistance —.
and, waiting, he then seems to choose someone.
ardently lifts his hand.
festive almost, as though to give himself in marriage.

LATE AUTUMN IN VENICE.

No longer does the town drift like a bait
that catches all emerging days.

And in your gaze the palaces of glass
sound crisper. Out of gardens hangs

the summer like a heap of puppets,
heads downward, tired, and slain.

But from the bottom of old skeletons of woods
a will arises : as if, over night,

the general of the sea should double
the galleys in the waking arsenal
to tar already the next morning's air

with a flotilla, beating oars, that throngs
and on a sudden has—in all flags day—
the great wind, shining, fatal.

PARTING.

How I have felt what parting means.

How I still know it : something dark and cruel
and never overcome, that once more shows
a perfect unity, and holds it there and tears it up.

And how defenceless I was watching
what, calling to me, let me go,
and what remained behind as if it were all women—
and yet but small and white, nothing but this :

a waving that applied to me no more,
something that softly went on waving—, that already
was hardly any longer explicable :
perhaps a plum-tree which a cuckoo left in haste.

SPANISH DANCER

As in the hand a sulphur-match,
white, before blazing, stretches into all directions
convulsive tongues— : her round dance starts,
precipitate, bright, hot, to spread convulsively
within the circle of the near spectators.

And suddenly it is completely flame.

With her glance she inflames her hair,
and all at once, with daring art, she whirls
her whole attire into this conflagration
out of which stretch like frightened snakes
her bare arms, rattling and awake.

And then : as if the fire ran short
she takes it all together, flings it off
very imperiously and with a haughty gesture,
and gazes : raving, it lies on the ground,
and still it blazes and will not surrender—
But sure, triumphant, with a sweet
saluting smile she lifts her face
and stamps it out with small firm feet.

Rainer Maria RILKE.
(translations
by Ruth SPEIRS.)

CONON IN EXILE

Three women have slept with my books ;
Penelope among admirers of the ballads,
Let down her hair over my exercises
But was hardly aware of me ; the author
Of tunes which made men like performing dogs
She did not die but left me for a singer in a wig.

Later Ariadne read of the *Universe*,
Made a journey under the islands from her own
Green home, husband, a house with olive trees.
She lay with my words and let me breathe
Upon her face ; later fell like a gull from the
Great ledge in Scio. Relations touched her body
Warm and rosy from the oil like a scented loaf,
Not human any more—but not divine as they had hoped.

You who pass the islands will perhaps remember
The lovely Ion, harmless, patient and in love.
Our quarrels disturbed the swallows in the eaves
The wild bees could not work in the vine.
Shaken and ill, one of true love's experiments,
It was she who lay in the stone bath dry-eyed.
Having the impression that her body had become
A huge tear about to drop from the eye of the world.
We never learned that marriage is a kind of architecture.
The nursery virtues were missing, all of them,
So nobody could tell us why we suffered.

It would be untrue to say that *the Art of Marriage*
And the others of *Peace in the Self and of Love*
Brought me no women; I remember bodies, arms, faces,
But I have forgotten their names.

Finally I am here. Conon in exile on Andros
Like a spider in a bottle writing the immortal
Of Love and Death, through the bodies of those
Who slept with my words but did not know me;
An old man with a skinful of wine
Living from pillow to poke under a vine.
At night the sea roars under the cliffs.
The past harms no one who lies close to the Gods.
Even in these notes upon myself I see
I have put down women's names like some
Philosophical proposition. At last I understand
They were only forms for my own ideas,
With names and mouths and different voices.
In them I lay with myself, my style of life,
Knowing only coitus with the shadows,
By our blue Aegean which forever,
Washes and pardons and brings us home.

Lawrence DURRELL.

A NOTE ON CAVAFY.

Aeschylus or Palamas are easy poets, wrote George Seferis lately⁽¹⁾, Cavafy and Calvos are difficult. That is, Aeschylus and Palamos may be difficult to get the sense of, but when understood, or even before complete understanding, can be apprehended as poetry. Cavafy and Calvos are easy to construe, hard to apprehend as poetry; Cavafy because of his prosaic methods and matter.

For us Barbarians (in the ancient sense of the word, that is for those who are not Greeks) two initial difficulties in appreciating Cavafy disappear. We are not passionately concerned in the language question. All our prejudices may be in favour of “speech rhythm”, and we may think that Greek, like English, “ought to be kept up”. But it is not our own quarrel, and we are not likely to be so sensitive to words in a language not our own as to be offended that a poet writes in a mixed language, with a “literary” flavouring, and not in pure demotic.

Nor have we preconceived opinions about what a Greek poet in the twentieth century should be. We do not complain if he is not heroic, or antique, or mythopoeic. These qualities do not seem very suitable in a twentieth century writer with any contemporary sensibility. And, unless we are archæologists, we do not demand that a Greek poet should belong body and soul to fifth century Athens.

Cavafy belongs not merely to Greece but to the whole Hellenic world. Alexandria and Byzantium were both his own city, also Liverpool. But nowhere Hellenic was foreign to him, Antioch, Smyrna or Cyrene; and any Hellenic theme, literature, sophistry, pederasty, religion, was his own. But he had his own point-of-view from which he dealt with them, and his own manner of dealing.

He said he was not a Hellene, still less a Hellenist; he was Hellenistic⁽²⁾. That is, he belonged to the Hellenistic tradition of his birth place, Alexandria. His work belongs to the literature of the Mouseion which “was not interested in ultimate problems nor even in problems of behaviour... to be graceful or pathetic or learned or amusing or indecent--this sufficed it”⁽³⁾. The

⁽¹⁾ Prologue to a recent edition of Calvos. — ⁽²⁾ Timos MALANOS, *The Poet C. P. Cavafy*. —

⁽³⁾ E. M. FORSTER, *Alexandria: a history and a guide*.

Alexandrines are commonly called the most contemporary of the ancients, and Cavafy was a modern Alexandrine, the last and perhaps the greatest of that school, whose poetry was decorative, allusive, and generally about love.

From the nineteenth century he had also learned something. *Tedium vitae* was not an ancient theme, and it is the theme of several of the best of his early poems, of *Walls*, *Windows*, *Monotony* and the famous *City*. And from Browning or from the French he had learned to tell a short story, though the short stories are eminently Cavafian.

This story-telling, and this kinship with the symbolists, brings Cavafy near to the earlier Eliot, and makes him easier for us. And he himself is an Eliot character, with a touch of J. Alfred Prufrock, something of the waiter of *Dans le restaurant*, that unromantic figure remembering past romance—but most of all, he is *Gerontion*. He is a little, old man, entirely unheroic, who was certainly not at Thermopylae—though he has the gift of irony, which Eliot keeps for himself and does not give to his personages. With an ironic nostalgia he recollects his own past adventures, and the infinitely varied past of his race. The Greek world is old, and as a poet he is middle-aged or elderly.

Sometimes his contemporary themes are trivial, sometimes his poems about the past are pedantic. His language may be as barren as that of a newspaper report, or of an extract from a biographical dictionary. But into a trivial or sordid episode he can introduce a tragic intensity comparable in force with that of Toulouse-Lautrec (though not in the least similar in any other respect). “*He knew the anguish of the flesh*”, ... and a lot of French poetry looks very silly beside his. Or he may twist or trip up an ancient subject in such a way as to ruin its classical and petrified dignity, but to bring out poignant flashes of pathos and actuality. These happen often enough for him to be regarded by many people as a major poet.

Cavafy wished to be translated word for word, not “poetically”; he is therefore either easy or impossible to translate. If the picture, the story, or the feeling can be conveyed, the translation may be regarded as tolerably successful. Though the language is lost, language is not with him everything, as it is with most good poets; his use of words is exact, but uncreative. He knew what he wished to say before he had said it.⁽¹⁾

Robert LIDDELL.

⁽¹⁾ Readers interested in Cavafy are referred to two further articles on his work, one of which is by George Seferis, in the May number of the *Citadel*.

LETTERS.

Letters, like blood along a weakening body
move fainter round our map. On dangerous wings,
on darkness-loving keels they go, so longed for;
but say no memorable things.

The 'dear' and 'darling' and the 'yours for ever'
are relics of a style. But most appears
mere rambling notes : passion and tenderness
fall like a blot or a burst of tears.

Now public truths are scarce as sovereigns,
what measure for the personal truth? How can
this ink and paper coursing continents
utter the clothed or the naked man?

Bernard SPENCER.

CITY OF BENARES.

The bell that tolls my syllables can tell
An underwater tale, clang how there fell
Suddenly out of a shouting surface world
Into dumb calm doomed children, and there curled
(Currents' sick fingers whispering at their hair)
Round them a coiling clutch, was our despair.
Sea's soft sad pressure, like the sprawl of love,
Darkly spreadeagled, so they could not move,
The wide wet mouth was heavy, they would choke,
Till in that cold confusion pity spoke :
"This is a nightmare and one is asleep.
This is a dream, my brave one, do not weep,
Often may drown in dreams and not be dead :
Such weight is mother leaning on your bed."

But having thought of this to cheat my pain,
That woe and wonder harrows me again,
Fat clouds seem bulked like whales, while through the green
Grave tons of twilight, in a submarine
Solidity of air like sea I move,
Pressure of horror how our hate hurts love.
Deeper than grief can plummet, mercy lies
But not so deep as trust in children's eyes,
Justice is high in heaven, but more high
Blood of the innocent shall smear the sky—
Or think that red the flame of seraph wings,
See stained-glass heaven, where each darling sings
In God's dark luminous world of green and gold
As lovely as death's waters, but less cold :
Think what you will, but like the crisping leaf
In whipped October, crack your thoughts to grief.
In the drenched valley, whimpering and cold,
The small ghosts flicker, whisper, unconsoled.

G. S. FRASER.
(with acknowledgements to *The White Horseman*.)

EGYPTIAN MYTHOLOGY.

Collected in the most unexpected places,
Cast up by the foolish sea,
Drawn painfully from the earth's brown mould,
The limbs are all brought home.
In Philæ by the river,
Tired out with walking
Isis sleeps, in long-remembered arms.

I have netted eyes like wings
In the dusk of a hundred towns,
There is a voice like water
With me many years,
A forehead floating on a Cornish wave,
And a mouth I remember from my youth;
But still the heart lacks and Time passes.
What use in these disparate limbs,
Unconscious hands in darkening rooms,
And in the flesh-mould, hugged like bulbs,
Mere bones and promises and bones.
O how shall I gather you
From this complication of days,
Or ever in the maze of hours find you,
For Time passes and the heart lacks.

Robin FEDDEN.

THE SEA-GOD GLAUCON⁽¹⁾.

Chancing on any beach to find him,
On any deserted shore, how will you greet
That eminent form, so marred by scouring waves
And the savage equinox?

Curiously whorled a polished gap
Gives access to his brain
Where cruising fish escape the rabid sea.
Cupped in his navel lies a pool
Neap tides uncover and a grey crab inhabits ;
Rain falling there, the tasteless water from the clouds,
Seems warmer than the ocean waves.
His lids once sensitive to light are frayed
And limpets creeping in his ravined eyes
Shut out the sun.
Like empty shells his ears secrete the sand
And hold the root of that salt weed
Whose yellow head
Sways in the nagging ebb.

How can you ever, occasional bather,
Know the waves' acknowledged master? How suspect
This giant trunk and battered long-shore wreck
Still hide the sea-god Glaucon?

Robin FEDDEN.

⁽¹⁾ Plato says that Glaucon, lying for many years on an Aegean beach, was so worked by the action of the waves and so changed by the invasion of sea-life, became in fact so "marine", that men passing did not recognize a deity in the recumbent reef.

THE PARDONER'S TALE.

I

Since the bare bone, and since
the glistening sinew, press
naked together, wince
at mutual nakedness
—for flesh and skin but gloss
the rails they're stretched across :

men must conceal their love
with glamour about the bone,
prank and patch and glove
that sensual skeleton,
till only their desires,
and not themselves, are liars.

II

So the desire that cannot live
is given features and a voice;
that echo from the beds of love
answers anarchy with vice
—an outward ecstasy compressed
in the unwilling masochist.

Then what remains to lose or vaunt
—beauty, wit, or words of skill?
What angel amnesties prevent
the scraping death around the skull?
—then what creation stripped of fear
hungering turns conqueror?

III

So I was driven forth
out of my discontent :
by narrow paths I went
homewards and into death.

I journeyed night and day,
sunrise to moon's set ;
but never once I met
a fellow on the way.

Till at my mother's gate
I paused, and heard the mouse
cry kingship of the house
—and knew I was too late.

Terence TILLER.

The next number of *Personal Landscape* will appear in October. Contributions should be sent to *Bernard Spencer*, c/o *The Anglo-Egyptian Union, Sharia Fuad Ist., Zamalek*. Copies of Numbers 2 and 3 may be obtained, at P.T. 5 per copy, from the same address. Number 1 is out of print.